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# ETHNIC IDENTITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

*There is evidence to suggest that young children more readily absorb the subtle messages that are encoded in any type of text and talk, and what they take away from these texts contributes in helping them develop their own identity in relation to their role in society. In this paper, we examine the construction of ethnic identity in a selection of English language textbooks targeted at young Malaysian children in primary schools. Based on a content analysis of visual and verbal language in two Primary Three English language textbooks, we report on the encoded messages that are transmitted to young Malaysian children about their place in society. The findings reveal significant imbalances in the way characters of different ethnic backgrounds are represented. This imbalance is a cause for concern as the message conveyed to young Malaysian children could be potentially damaging.*

**Keywords:** *textbook, ethnicity, identity construction*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The multi-ethnic composition of Malaysia has constituted an enduring feature of Malaysia's history. While mainstream textbooks trace the arrival of Indians and Chinese to the 14th century when traders arrived in the port of Malacca, more recent archaeological evidence in Kedah's Lembah Bujang points to the presence of an Indian civilization that dates back to the 5th century BC (Mok, 2013). The Malay Kingdom, as evidenced in the discovery of the Bujang Valley, welcomed traders from both India and China and their presence in this land predates the arrival of Arab traders by more than a thousand years (Mok, 2013). Suffice to say, the Indians and the Chinese, with the Malays and Bumiputeras of Sabah and Sarawak, have formed an integral part of Malaysia for centuries. Today, this racial composition is reflected in Malaysia's extremely diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic school population. The strength of the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia is best reflected in the country's education system that allows for the use of Malay, Mandarin and Tamil as mediums of instruction at primary schools. There continue to be concerns about this system, the most prominent of which is the concern that having multiple languages as mediums of instructions in primary school is divisive in nature and does not lend itself to nation-building (Palansamy, 2014). Despite this concern, the system continues to remain steadfastly in place, many decades after independence.

Given the nation's ethnic composition, unity is always high on the national agenda and schools are seen as a training ground that prepares the next generation of Malaysians to stay united in this nation of diverse cultures. The inherent challenges facing Malaysia in realizing this is an on-going concern, not just for Malaysia but also other countries with a multiethnic composition. Foster (1999) for example described the importance of curriculum in American schools by referring to it as a tool for cultivating a sense of national identity.

School textbooks are the product of a vigorous system of evaluation (Ainsworth, 2010). Any book that is selected as a school textbook must be of the highest quality and must meet the aspirations of the nation. This is because textbooks are "gatekeepers of ideas, values and knowledge" (Foster, 1999:253). Given the ethnic composition of Malaysian society, producers of

school textbooks must ensure that characters in books equitably represent the various ethnic communities in society (Liew, 2007). Such representation is imperative because all children, irrespective of their ethnic background, need to see themselves in the texts they read. Characters in texts serve to remind children of their place in society and inform them of their potential roles in society. The importance of examining ethnic representation in textbooks is reflected in various studies globally (Baranovitch, 2010; Darren, 2009; Hentinen, 2012; Hogben & Waterman, 2009). Stray (1994:2), cited in Mazawi (2011:171), succinctly defines a textbook as a source of knowledge found in “an authoritative pedagogic” publication. In addition to being a source of information, textbooks also construct a point of view that is accepted by a community as commonsense (Ranciere, 2004:13, in Mazawi, 2011:174). However, what is common to a community is often defined by a wider discourse, often dictated by those in power. This is an observation supported by Apple (1986) as well as Martínez (2002), cited in Taboas-Pais and Rey-Cao (2012:310), who describe the textbook as “an important socializing agent and communicator of values” which can be used by certain quarters as an effective way of controlling others in their society.

Textbooks are indeed “contested authoritative articulations” with contents depending upon “differential political meanings” (Mazawi, 2011:174). This is a view shared by Fahlgren and Sawyer (2011:535) who opine that texts create different realities through a process of “invisible normalisations” to establish hierarchies and determine power relations. In this way, textbooks “present apparently indisputable ideas and legitimize a specific version of society” (Taboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012:313). In reference to the influence of textbooks in shaping the thoughts of children, Joly (2003) cited in Taboas-Pais and Rey-Cao (2012:311) assert that textbooks carry within them “powerful messages that unconsciously condition” the behaviour of children. Given the ability of texts to shape reality and influence behaviour, a critical reflection of texts is necessary to unpack deeply embedded ideologies that are often taken to be part of the collective psyche of a community. This can be accomplished through an examination of language in textbooks to learn about dominant ideologies and the way society is shaped (Roberts, 2013:43).

In discussing the writing of history textbooks in Malaysia, Cheah (2003:229) describes the content of these books as a contested site for people

of different ethnic origins with each ethnic group narrating the past in ways that safeguards their interests. Clearly, textbooks are written from specific points of view. Examining these points of views helps us to understand the embedded messages about ethnic identity. The present study is guided by the assumption that while textbooks may appear to be sensitive to issues of ethnicity on the surface level, blurred and even hierarchical constructions of race relations may exist at a deeper level; this can only be unpacked through a careful analysis of language. Previous studies that examined ethnicity in textbooks have focused primarily on history textbooks (Foster, 1999; Igartua, 2008) as the content of history books allow for the examination of stereotyping as well as foregrounding and backgrounding of people and events along ethnic lines. Researchers of English language textbooks have also been interested in examining stereotyping and discrimination; however, their focus has primarily been on gender issues (Lee and Collins, 2009). This research trend is also reflected in the work of Malaysian researchers. For example, Cheah (2003) examined ethnicity in history textbooks and Sandakumari and Mardziah Hayati Abdullah (2003) examined gender bias in English language textbooks.

There is no denying the importance of examining gender bias language in English language textbooks and other forms of written documents. Focus on sexist language over several decades has created awareness about the inappropriateness of such language and people are now less tolerant to forms of sexist language in texts, specifically texts targeted at young, impressionable children. Similarly, an examination of ethnic representation in texts is also equally warranted. It is the contention of the researchers that in addition to ensuring Malaysian textbooks are free of sexism; they also need to be free of racism as perpetuated by unfair representations of the various ethnic groups in the country. For this reason, the present study adds to this existing body of knowledge by examining ethnic identity in English language textbooks, specifically those used in Primary Three at Malaysian national and national-type schools. These are books targeted at children aged 9.

## METHOD

The aim of the study was to determine how ethnicity is represented in English Language textbooks. Towards this end, a case study approach was adopted and two English Language textbooks used in Primary Three were selected for analysis. One textbook was in use in national schools while the other was in use in national-type schools.

The details of the two textbooks are as follows:

### **Textbook used in national schools:**

- Author: Lim Eng Seong, Manjindarjit Kaur and Zubaidah binti Awang
- Publisher: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
- Number of units: 16
- Number of pages: 130

### **Textbook used in national-type schools:**

- Author: Audrey Lim Bee Yoke and Shanti David
- Publisher: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
- Number of units: 16
- Number of pages: 98

The research instruments used in the present study were designed to facilitate data collection to answer the research questions. Generally, the aim of the present study was to examine the equitable representation of characters based on their ethnic composition in the selected textbooks. The first research instrument was a checklist used to identify characters by ethnicity in every visual that appeared in the Primary Three English Language textbooks. The second instrument was also a checklist used to list out the various discursive markers used in relation to characters whose ethnicity was clearly identified. First, copies of both English Language textbooks used in national and national-type primary schools for Year 3 children were purchased. Next, a checklist was developed to facilitate the analysis of visuals in the selected texts. Every visual in the text was scanned and documented before being analysed to determine the distribution of characters by ethnicity. Having completed the visual analysis, the discursive strategies, that is, the use of language to depict characters of various ethnicities, were analysed. At this stage, the focus was on (i) the use of nouns to assign roles to characters and (ii) the use of adjectives to describe characters.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The visual language of English Language textbooks written for Malaysian children in Primary Three at national and national-type schools was analysed. Visuals in the textbook targeted at children in national-type Chinese and Tamil schools had a total of 492 characters. In contrast, there were 887 characters in the visuals of the national school English Language textbook. The breakdown of characters by race and gender is provided in the Table 1:

**Table 1: Distribution of Characters by Race and Gender**

Ethnicity	Gender	SJK* (n=492) (%)	SK** (n= 887) (%)
Indian	Male	28 5.7	75 8.5
	Female	39 7.9	49 5.5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67</b> <b>13.6</b>	<b>124</b> <b>14.0</b>
Chinese	Male	51 10.4	54 6.1
	Female	85 17.3	113 12.7
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>151</b> <b>27.7</b>	<b>167</b> <b>18.8</b>
Malay	Male	59 12.0	314 35.4
	Female	20 4.1	146 16.5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b> <b>16.1</b>	<b>460</b> <b>51.9</b>
East Malaysian	Male	15 3.0	68 7.7
	Female	0 0	7 0.8
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0</b> <b>3.0</b>	<b>75</b> <b>8.5</b>
Others (non-identifiable)	Male	146 29.7	31 3.5
	Female	49 10.0	30 3.4
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>195</b> <b>39.7</b>	<b>61</b> <b>6.9</b>

\*SJK – national-type Chinese and Tamil schools

\*\*SK – national schools

It was found that the frequency with which characters of different ethnic groups appeared in visuals was indeed different across the two textbooks, with the exception of Indian characters that appeared as frequently in both textbooks (13.6% of all characters in SJK books and 14.0% of all characters in SK books). In SJK books that are targeted at a largely Tamil and Chinese student population, it was found that the majority of the characters (39.7%) were not ethnically marked either visually or within accompanying written texts. Among characters that were ethnically marked, Chinese characters were the most prominent (27.7%). This was followed by Malay characters (16.1%) and lastly Indian characters (13.6%). Although this textbook was being used in Tamil schools, Indian characters were hardly found in the visuals. This is a cause for concern as children in those schools do not have the opportunity to see characters of their ethnicity within the texts. Also, it should be noted that the East Malaysian community was only represented by one character, Philip, and it was only evident that Philip was a Sabahan towards the end of the SJK textbook. This means that there is little opportunity to educate Malaysian children in national-type schools about ethnic groups from East Malaysia who make up a significant part of the nation's population.

The visual representation of characters in the SK textbook somewhat reflected Malaysia's ethnic composition with Malay characters most frequently represented, followed by Chinese characters, Indian characters and East Malaysian characters. In contrast to SJK books, characters whose identity was not identifiable only made up 6.9% of all characters. Malay characters made up more than 50% of all characters in the textbook. Chinese and Indian characters were far smaller in number making up just 18.8% and 14.0% of all characters. This means that Chinese and Indian children in SK schools have far fewer opportunities to see themselves visually represented in their English Language textbook. Furthermore, children in East Malaysia who go to national schools will hardly see their ethnicity represented in the SK textbook as only 8.5% of all characters in the visuals represent East Malaysians.

The inequitable representation of ethnicity in the visuals is a cause for concern as these textbooks serve an important role as a socializing agent (Taboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012). The ways characters are portrayed in textbooks serve to tell children about their place in society. Therefore, if



a particular ethnic group is significantly under-represented and children of this ethnic group are not able to see themselves equitably represented in the visuals, the message they decipher would likely affect the way they perceive their role in society. As stressed by Sawyer (2011:535), texts help create realities through a subtle process of “invisible normalisations”. The fact that English Language textbooks written for SJK schools have a significantly higher representation of Chinese characters and English Language textbooks for SK schools have a significantly higher representation of Malay characters suggest that these two books are shaping different realities.

Besides representing characters visually, textbooks also construct ethnic identity through discursive strategies, that is, through words and grammatical structures that position characters differently.

The words in the textbooks work with the accompanying visuals. In the case of textbooks used in national schools (SK), the analysis of visuals revealed that the overwhelming majority of characters in the book were Malay characters, and so it followed that it was Malay characters who were accorded the widest range of roles and traits in the Year 3 textbook. For example, Malay characters were accorded the following roles in the written text: doctor, lecturer, headmistress, film director, fire-fighter, driver, pianist, drummer, guitarist, and keyboardist. In addition to this, the Malay characters were also ascribed the following traits: handsome, strong, clever, smart, brave, kind, slim, beautiful, and cute. In comparison, Indian characters were ascribed the following roles: engineer, doctor, writer, carpenter, cartoonist, nurse, zookeeper, violinist, and cellist. Indian characters were not ascribed any significant personality traits. The Chinese and East Malaysian characters in the textbooks appeared to be the least developed characters in the SK textbook. The Chinese characters were found to occupy the role of farmer, singer and flutist while the East Malaysian characters were only found in the role of teacher, baker and artist. Like the Indian characters in the textbook, the Chinese and East Malaysian characters were not ascribed any significant traits in the selected textbook.

This analysis of the written text in SK textbook is a cause for concern given the embedded messages that are subtly transmitted to children about their role in society. The fact that Chinese, Indian and East Malaysian children in SK schools do not see themselves equitably represented in the

textbook they are reading may suggest to children that they play a less than significant role in society. Given the fact that SK schools were created on the basis that it was a training ground for Malaysian children to learn about the multicultural, multiracial composition of Malaysian society, it is even more pressing to ensure that the various ethnic characters in the textbook are equitably represented. In the case of the English Language textbook that is written for children in Chinese and Tamil schools, it was found that the characters in these books were less developed. The characters rarely took on any particular role and they were rarely ascribed traits. However, an analysis of the textbook revealed that Malay characters were ascribed the roles of policeman, policewoman and fire-fighter, while there were Chinese characters in the role of doctors. In contrast, the Indian characters were not ascribed any roles in the textbook. In terms of character traits, Chinese characters were found ascribed traits such as rich, poor and happy, while a Malay character was described as hard working. Indian characters were not ascribed any traits. These are ideologically significant observations because the messages that this textbook transmits to children are different. Indian children in a Tamil school where the SJK English textbook would be used will not see themselves in the variety of roles and character traits that Malay children in a SK school see of themselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the visual and verbal representation of ethnic characters in English Language textbooks used in SK and SJK schools reveal an inequitable representation of ethnic characters. It appears that the roles and traits assigned to the ethnic characters was something done at random. It could also be argued that the distribution reflects subconscious decisions made by the authors/editors/illustrators of the textbooks. It is apparent that there were no specific guidelines given for the way ethnic characters should be represented in textbooks, leaving this largely to the discretion of the writers. While the writers have made a conscious effort to ensure that characters of all major ethnic backgrounds are represented in the textbooks, their distribution appears random. Given the fact that these textbooks serve a very important role in imparting knowledge to young Malaysian children about their role and responsibilities in society, there is a need to make a conscious effort to ensure that the various ethnic groups are equitably represented rather than merely asking for ethnic groups to be represented.

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